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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a highly specialized ESL program for a group of foreign students at the University of Southern California. The students were foreign graduates in business administration and economics who were entering the MBA program at USC. Previous experience with such students indicated that many entered the program with an insufficient knowledge of English business vocabulary and the highly language- and culture-oriented subject of business communication skills. Therefore, a special 10-week course, to be taken prior to the first semester of the regular program, was developed. Approximately 30 students participated in the program in July and August, 1974. They attended classes in business communication skills, taught by a professor in the School of Business, and ESL classes in reading and syntax, taught by staff members of the American Language Institute. The ESL teachers attended many of the business sessions and integrated much of the program material into their language lessons, either in the form of business readings or in syntax exercises that utilized the vocabulary of the current business lesson. Special vocabulary tapes were devised to aid the students in learning the business vocabulary. Pre- and post-tests in vocabulary and communication skills revealed that students had made remarkable progress in both these areas. (Author/KM)

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"ENGLISH THROUGH BUSINESS AND BUSINESS THROUGH ENGLISH"*

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a unique and innovative attempt to provide a highly specialized ESL program for a group of foreign students at the University of Southern California. The students were graduates in business administration and economics from foreign universities who were entering the MBA program at USC. Previous experience with such students indicated that many entered the program with an insufficient knowledge of English business vocabulary, as well as a deficiency in the highly language- and culture-oriented subject of business communication skills. Therefore, it was decided to develop a special 10-week course to be taken prior to the first semester of the regular program. Approximately 30 students participated in the program in July and August of 1974. The students, who divided into two groups according to language proficiency, attended classes in business communication skills, taught by a professor in the School of Business, and ESL classes in reading and syntax, taught by staff members of the American Language Institute. The ESL teachers attended many of the business sessions, and integrated much of the program material into their language lessons, either in the form of business readings, or in syntax exercises that utilized the vocabulary of the current lesson in the business course. Special vocabulary tapes were devised to aid the students in the learning of a tremendous amount of business vocabulary. Students were pre- and post-tested in the areas of vocabulary and communication skills. By the end of the program it was determined that students had made remarkable progress in both these areas, as measured by the tests.

I. Background

This paper describes an attempt to deal innovatively with certain problems faced by foreign students entering the Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Southern California. Until recently these students had been given little special consideration, other than the assignment of English as a Second Language courses to those who tested below par in their English proficiency. While further work in English was clearly called for in a number of cases, this approach had yielded less than optimal results, as evidenced by the low performance and adjustment problems of many of the foreign students in the program. It seemed clear that these students encountered difficulties not experienced by their American counterparts. The first and most obvious, of course, was the shock of having to adjust to a new language and culture, and to the American academic environment. A further problem concerned a deficiency in certain skill areas--a lack of familiarity with computer technology as applied to business practices, and in some cases an insufficient background in math and calculus. But the most basic problem, it appeared, was the necessity of learning or "relearning" business administration from a specifically American, English-language point of view. It was found that much of the content of business administration as taught at an American university, with its cultural orientation, concepts, and special vocabulary was simply unfamiliar to students from other cultural backgrounds.

In the spring semester of 1974, representatives from the American Language Institute (ALI) and the School of Business met to plan a prototype program that would help meet the particular needs of the foreign students. The result was the development

of a ten-week program, to be taken by foreign business graduates in the summer prior to their admittance to the regular MBA program. The special program began on June 14, 1974, with an enrollment of thirty-one students.

II. Program Design and Implementation

The program that evolved contained two basic components: a business component and an ESL component. The business component focused on developing skills in business communications, math and calculus, and computer applications. The undergraduate course in business communications was taken as the core of the business component for two reasons: 1) it is one of the major areas in which a competency is demanded of graduates of the MBA program; and 2) the subject of "communications" is particularly culture-laden and has special relevance to the problems of foreign students in a country where another language is spoken. The function of the ESL component was to improve the English speaking and writing ability of the participants so they could cope better with the linguistic demands of the regular business program. A third element of the program, though not so formalized, concerned student orientation, both to the local environment and to American business practices. Activities of this type included briefings on life in Los Angeles, social gatherings at pleasure spots in the area, and a series of field trips to local businesses and industries.

A key factor in the success of a program like this was felt to be the integration of the business and the English components. One could label the approach "English through business and business through English" in the sense that the subject matter of the English classes derived from business material and an emphasis was placed on increasing the students' knowledge and understanding of the

American business environment as they gained in linguistic competence. Specific reference will be made below to the ways in which the ESL instructors dealt with business material in their classes, but in fact the work in the ESL classes was coordinated with the business activities in many ways. For example, ESL instructors attended a selected number of business sessions to diagnose linguistic problem areas and to give students one-the-spot language coaching, developed listening exercises to aid students in understanding taped business lectures, and helped students to plan and prepare their written assignments. Similarly, the instructor of the business course sought various means of tying English instruction into his activities. He visited the ESL classes to acquaint himself with the methods of teaching non-English-speaking students, and spent considerable time developing vocabulary and other communicative skills in preparation for oral and written assignments for his class.

A second integrative factor concerned the assignment of a group survey research project that was completed over the course of the program. Students selected two topics for the project: a survey of USC students' reasons for buying the cars they drove, and a survey of student responses to color, design, and copy in magazine advertisements. The chief advantage of the project was that it helped students to develop skills in such areas of business communications as research design, the writing of items for a questionnaire, data-gathering and processing, and the writing up of a final report. Each area of the project also emphasized particular language-related skills. For example, students sharpened their oral skills while preparing to give the interview, and dealt with problems of organizing and presenting material in writing the final report.

At the outset of the program students were tested with regard to language proficiency (see below), and placed into two groups: an intermediate group and an advanced group. Each section met daily for approximately five hours according to the following schedule:

1½ hours--	Management Laboratory
1 hour--	Learning Support Center
2½ hours--	ESL classes

The Management Laboratory was the focus for most of the business-related activities, which were conducted on a group and a sub-group basis. In the group format students attended lectures and discussed various aspects of business communications as new topics were presented weekly.* Students then frequently broke down into smaller groups for further discussion and problem-solving. This type of format was used extensively when it became time to develop and critique items for the questionnaire. The facilities of the Management Laboratory, equipped with viewing rooms with one-way glass, were particularly suited to the sub-group format. Here, for instance, groups of students could be observed conducting a mock interview, or involved in various types of management games.

The work in the Learning Support Center was mostly individualized. In the LSC students could take advantage of a variety of materials on audio cassette tapes and audio-video systems. At the students' disposal were tapes of course modules (described below), vocabulary tapes, and an audio-visual introduction to computer operations. Students worked at their own pace in individual booths, and after they were introduced to the material of each week were allowed to select or review material on their own. Transcripts of the audio tapes were also provided for students to use if they wished.

*For a list of week-by-week topics and activities, see the Appendix.

The English as a Second Language classes made up the third segment on the daily schedule. Each group participated in two ESL classes: a reading and writing class and a syntax class. For the advanced group the reading and writing class met for 1½ hours, and the syntax class for 1 hour; and for the intermediate class the proportion of time devoted to each subject was reversed. The rationale behind this distribution of class hours was the belief that the advanced group could benefit from a greater emphasis on reading materials, while the intermediate group would need to concentrate more on the analysis and production of correct structures.

In the reading and writing classes, students engaged in a wide variety of activities with a focus, naturally, on reading and composition.. Students read and discussed passages related to different aspects of business communications, though the purpose was not so much to teach business content as to stimulate discussion and ideas for writing. At frequent intervals students were asked to write short essays on business topics. The topics were either selected from the readings, or dealt with problem-solving or decision-making situations encountered in the business field for which the students had to describe an appropriate solution. In connection with the writing activities, students learned techniques of outlining, developing topic sentences, and organizing and describing written material. Students also dealt with business vocabulary in the reading and writing classes, primarily by studying roots and affixes of words drawn from the business vocabulary list. A final activity of the class involved instruction in research techniques, including using the library, taking and organizing notes for a formal paper, and developing a bibliography. No difference in approach was

made between the intermediate and advanced groups; however, the lower group dealt with fewer readings, since the time was actually shorter for them and they required more time to analyze and discuss readings.

The syntax classes, on the other hand, were handled quite differently for each of the two groups. The intermediate group devoted much of its time to the analysis and practice of structures (e.g. noun clauses, relatives, complements, negations, conditionals) that appear in business writings. Students practiced structures by combining and breaking down sentences that the instructor had written to contain the current week's vocabulary. Writing activities at the paragraph level and above also tended to be highly controlled. In their written assignments, students analyzed short passages as to structure and vocabulary and rewrote them using simpler or more complex structures, or they wrote paragraphs on business topics closely following the format of the model. A relatively minor portion of the students' time was given over to the study of formal business communications (e.g. business letters, resumes, applications, etc.) and of types of technical writing, including the description of a process or a mechanism. This approach was first attempted with the advanced group, but it was soon found that these students did not require an equal emphasis on syntax. Therefore the exercises on syntactical structures were eliminated for this group, and the areas of formal business communications and technical writing were elaborated upon, with a greater emphasis given to varying approaches in organization, content, and the techniques of writing.

At various intervals the regular schedule was interrupted to give time for other activities. Visits were made on a half-day basis to three business firms: First Western Bank, Douglas Aircraft, and Bullock's, a large department store in the Los Angeles area. Students toured the physical plants of each firm, received orientation concerning that company's business practices and methods, and had the opportunity to ask questions about various phases of company operations. During two weeks toward the end of the program, a daily portion of time was devoted to computer familiarization, and instruction in math and calculus.

III. Materials

The text used in the business segment was the standard text for the undergraduate course in business communications, Norman B. Sigband's Communications in Management. In addition, students used the USC Flex Ed 302, a set of course materials in business communications that are specifically designed to complement the textbook. The 302 materials are divided into eight units or modules, each with its own cassette tape and workbook. Modules were selected to coordinate with topics that were currently being dealt with in the business class. Students listened to the module tapes in the Learning Support Center and read the audio scripts of the tapes.

Business vocabulary was an important part of materials development for the program. Vocabulary items were selected from the audio scripts of the course modules, and two vocabulary lists were prepared, one of which listed the words by module, and the other, a cumulative list, in alphabetical order. Both students and teachers had copies of the list, the students to review throughout the course period, and the teachers to develop exercises

relevant to the material of each week. A multiple choice test consisting of 50 vocabulary items was made up from the list. A series of vocabulary practice tapes was also devised, to be used by students in the Learning Support Center. On the vocabulary tapes, each word was pronounced twice, with time given for the student to repeat the pronunciation of the word. Then a definition of the word was given, followed by two examples of that word in sentences. Sufficient time was allowed for the student to repeat the sentences before going on to the next item.

No totally new materialswere developed for the ESL classes; rather, the instructors selected and adapted materials from a variety of sources. Many of the reading selections were drawn from the course textbook in business communications, or from other business texts, and from newspaper or magazine articles. In the syntax class the instructor adapted a standard syntax test and a text on technical writing, using examples from the business environment.

IV. Testing and Evaluation

Students were administered a battery of tests at the beginning of the program for placement purposes and to provide a basis for comparison at the program's conclusion. The first set tested the English skills of the applicants and consisted of three parts: a syntax test, a reading comprehension test, and an oral interview. The oral interview, during which students answered a number of questions about their background and goals in their field, was videotaped for purposes of later counseling and orientation. Students fell into one of three classifications on the basis of the tests. Those placing in the lowest category were considered to lack sufficient English skills to cope with the demands of the

program, and were directed to other courses at the American Language Institute. The students who placed in the next highest level were admitted to the full program and grouped in the intermediate and advanced classes. Those in the highest level were felt to have no need for further English. They were admitted to the program, but were not required to participate in the ESL classes.

In addition to the English tests, students took the specially devised business vocabulary test, as well as diagnostic examinations in basic mathematics, calculus, and computer familiarization, and a communication examination which was oriented toward the business communication proficiency requirement with the School of Business. With the exception of the English skills tests, all of the above measures were administered as post-tests. A comparison of the results shows the following:

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test Results

Test Title	Pre Test N	Mean	σ	Post Test N	Mean	σ	Mean Diff.	t
Vocabulary	31	31.	6.56	31	43.26	3.78	12.25	9.01
Basic Math	29	6.72	1.59	29	8.21	1.32	1.49	3.89
Calculus	29	8.62	4.41	29	12.89	3.08	4.27	4.27
Computer	31	6.97	5.37	31	14.52	4.18	7.55	6.17
Communication	31	49.32	10.09	31	81.87	6.44	32.55	15.13

(60 degrees of freedom)
P (t > 3.460) = .0005

While the difference between pre- and post-test scores shows positive results in all five areas, the areas of most significant improvement were in vocabulary and communications.

As part of an over-all evaluation of the program, students were asked to comment on various elements of the program, and to offer their suggestions for future improvements. Students seemed to find most elements of the program helpful, but singled out especially the lectures in the communications and reading classes, the intensive study of business vocabulary, the visits to businesses, and the practice in report-writing as the most useful activities. Those elements considered less useful were calculus and math. Student responses to the question, "How helpful to you was each of the following elements of the program?" are summarized as follows:

Table 2

Q: How helpful to you was each of the following elements of the program? (The scale was from 1 - 7 in terms of helpfulness.)

Topics	Mean Results
(a) Basic Mathematics	2.96
(b) Calculus	3.44
(c) Computer (BASIC)	4.46
(d) Learning Support Center Modules	5.44
(e) Research Project	5.35
(f) Reading	5.96
(g) Syntax	4.88
(h) Visits to First Western Bank, Bullock's, and Douglas Aircraft	6.08

For the next time arcund, students suggested that the program of visits be extended and the teaching of computer techniques be expanded to cover the length of the course. There was also a request for more individualized instruction and for a greater emphasis on certain areas in English, especially listening and oral skills.

V. Conclusions

Judging from the students' formal and informal evaluations, and from comments of the faculty and staff who participated in the program, it seems possible to state that the special summer program for foreign business students carried out its objectives with a high degree of success. Though the ultimate test of student performance would come in the following year when students became involved in the regular academic program, the positive results in two crucial areas of the program--vocabulary and business communications--were very encouraging. Moreover, both faculty and students reacted quite favorably to the integrated approach to teaching business and ESL. As one student commented in his evaluation: "I think all subjects learned were related together to make the whole program very helpful." Students were happy about the opportunity to become oriented to life in Los Angeles before the beginning of the regular semester, and were especially enthusiastic about the program of visits to businesses as a means of becoming acquainted with the American business environment. The program also appeared to generate other benefits that had not been anticipated. Working together as closely as they did throughout the summer, students developed strong friendships and an esprit de corps that could hopefully be sustained in the regular program. Students also developed strong relationships with the instructors, a factor that was promoted by outside social activities, out-of-hours counseling, and the friendly and informal attitudes of the instructors themselves.

Still, it was recognized that the program could be improved by changes in several areas. First, it was thought that an expanded program of visits to businesses and industries would be helpful to motivate students to apply their English and to further acquaint them with American business practices. Furthermore, besides undergoing testing during the first two or three days of the program, students should receive orientation about the problems, as well as the pleasures, of life in Los Angeles, especially with regard to living costs and transportation. Concerning the academic program, instructors believed that a regrouping of students by ability should take place from time to time during the program, and that, following student wishes, instruction in computer programming should be given throughout the ten weeks instead of for two weeks only. In view of the low student evaluation and relatively poor results of the instruction in math and calculus, it was decided that such instruction should be given purely on a basis of individual need in the following year's program. Finally, it appeared that the ESL classes would benefit from greater flexibility. It was recommended that a third class in spoken English, in which listening comprehension and note-taking would play a major role, be added to the syntax class and the reading and writing class. Student participation in these classes would depend on their need to develop certain skills, and extra hours would be assigned to weaker students for tutoring.

APPENDIX: Weekly Topics and Activities
(Module topics are underlined.)

Week 1: Orientation, diagnostic testing. Introduction to the process of communication. Establishment of laboratory work groups. Discussion of goals and conduct of survey research project. Individual oral presentations and evaluation. English instruction.

Week 2: Planning and research, information sources, sampling, questionnaire, documentation. Development of detailed plan for accomplishment of survey research project. English instruction.

Week 3: Planning and research, conference leadership and participation. Development of specific questions for the survey research project. Establishment of data analysis plans for each sub-group. English instruction.

Week 4: External business communication and the personal resume. Dry running of questionnaire and procedures for administration. Revisions as required. Sub-group oral presentations related to questionnaire revisions. English instruction.

Week 5: The process of listening for facts and feelings. Conduct of on-campus survey. Daily review of problems encountered. Collation of survey data on a daily basis. English instruction.

Week 6: The organization of a report, outlines, short reports. Sub-group oral presentations. English instruction. Visit to industry.

Week 7: Reports for decision making. Preparation of specific outline for survey research report. Analysis of data. Formal data presentation. Results and recommendations. English instruction. Counseling interviews. Visit to industry.

Week 8: Preparation of draft of final report. Performance of edit functions and review in directed sub-group discussions. Oral presentations of sub-group survey results and recommendations. Organizational behavior. Counseling interviews. English instruction. Computer familiarization. Instruction in math and calculus. Visit to industry.

Week 9: Completion of final report. English instruction. Organizational behavior. Counseling interviews. Computer familiarization. Instruction in math and calculus.

Week 10: Organizational behavior. Evaluation of different aspects of program. Student participation in evaluation of interview sessions and oral presentations. Final examination and diagnostic counseling recommendations based on experience gained in the ten week period.